

Paññā or Wisdom as the final stage

in the passage from Samsara to Nirvana

Professor Dhammavihari

In the early teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha, in what is believed to be the Theravada tradition as preserved in Pali canonical texts, paññā or wisdom [i.e. as adhipaññā sikkhā] is unquestionably held as the final accomplishment or sikkhā through which the total release of the mind [or cetovimutti] from its defilements [āsavehi] is attained. This release of mind is equated to the state of Nirvana. The regular statement which describes this spiritual success of both the Buddha himself and his disciples runs as follows: Puna ca paraṃ Sāriputta Tathāgato āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ ditth'eva dhamme sayamaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharati. [M.1.71 Mahasihanada Sutta]. Also as Idhāvuso sammādiṭṭhi sīlānuggahitā ca hoti sutānuggahitā ca hoti sākacchānuggahitā ca hoti samathānuggahitā ca hoti vipassanānuggahitā ca hoti. Imehi kho āvuso pañcahi aṅgehi anuggahitā sammā diṭṭhi cetovimuttiṃ phalā ca hoti cetovimuttiṃ phalānisamsā ca paññāvimuttiṃ phalā ca paññāvimuttiṃ phalānisamsā cā ' ti at M.1.294 Mahavedalla Sutta.

The accomplishments or sikkhā referred to above which constitute the entire Buddhist process of liberation are three in number [tisso sikkhā]. They are: 1. sīla or moral perfection, 2. samādhi or total concentration [i.e. gathering together] or mastery over mind and 3. paññā or perfection of wisdom. In relation to this wholly comprehensive classification of tisso sikkhā or threefold culture, the Noble Eightfold Path [Ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo] which is correctly equated to the fourth of the Four Noble Truths [i. e. magga sacca] is only a segment within it. This definitely implies that the Noble Eightfold Path does not and cannot contain within it everything which the threefold culture embodies. The Noble Eightfold Path is evidently the smaller unit which is contained within the larger one of threefold culture. This is clearly and categorically stated in one of the earliest

and, in our opinion, one of the most brilliant suttas of the Majjhima Nikaya. It is the Cullavedalla Sutta [M.1. 299-305] which is delivered by Theri Dhammadinna who ranks as one of the most eminent female disciples in the Buddhist Order. The Buddha authenticates every word of what she has stated in the above sutta and declares that he would in no way differ from what she has expressed [Mamañ ce' pi tvaṃ Visākha etaṃ atthaṃ puccheyyāsi aham' pi tam evam evam byākareyyaṃ yathā taṃ Dhammadinnāya bhikkhuniyā byākataṃ. Eso c' ev' etassa attho . Evam etaṃ dhārehi' ti. Ibid.]

The Mahacattarisaka Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [M.111.71-78], on the other hand, in a very exhaustive analysis of the Noble Eightfold Path, unmistakably indicates that after the last, i.e. the eighth item of the Path, viz. sammā samādhi [which means after the perfection and completion of sammā samādhi] there arises sammā ñāṇa or perfect wisdom as a ninth item. This is said to lead thereafter to the final release or sammā vimutti. Therefore the complete passage from the first step [pubbaṅgama] of correct vision or sammā diṭṭhi] to the final goal of arahantship, it is specifically stated, consists of ten stages [Dasaṅga-samannāgato arahā hoti. Ibid.].

Here we cannot, and must not fail to discover that what is added to the Noble Eightfold Path as the ninth item, to extend it up to arahantship in the tenth item, is sammā ñāṇa which is none other than paññā or perfect wisdom [The same list of ten items with ñāṇa and vimutti added to the Eightfold Path as ninth and tenth occurs in the Sallekha Sutta. M.1. 42]. For it is the arrival or acquisition of paññā [within the life-frame of a being, and not after his death] which brings about the total elimination of saṃsāra-binding defilements or āsava [Paññāya c'assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti. M. 1.160]. Paññā is thus the third and last item of the larger group called tisso sikkhā or threefold culture which was clearly and successfully argued out in the Cullavedalla Sutta [quoted above M.1.301] to be too large to be contained within the Eightfold Path. From this we are led to the invariable conclusion that the final category of paññā of the threefold culture is

not to be forced into or within the Eightfold Path. This final category of true wisdom or paññā is well outside the Path. This is emphatically stated by Theri Dhammadinna in the Cullavedalla Sutta who says that the three khandhā [or categories of the threefold culture] are not contained within the Eightfold Path [Na kho āvuso Visākha ariyena aṭṭhaṅgikena maggena tayo khandhā saṅgahitā. M.1.301]. However, there is no denying that as paving the way for the correction of vision, sammā diṭṭhi and sammā saṅkappa could be accommodated in the category of wisdom or paññākkhandha [Yā ca sammā diṭṭhi yo ca sammā saṅkappo ime dhammā paññākkhandhe saṅgahitā ' ti. loc.cit.].

Backed by a contrary expectation to force the inclusion of paññā within the framework of the Eightfold Path, many writers are seen dividing the Path into three segments, making them, as it were, equitable to the three divisions of sīla samādhi paññā of the threefold culture. They recklessly tear off the first two items of the Path [sammā diṭṭhi and sammā saṅkappa] from their legitimate primary position at the head of the Path and place them after the final item of sammā samādhi, wishing to equate them [taking these two items jointly] with paññā which is the final item of the threefold culture. This is much more than an unpardonable mal-grafting. Sammā diṭṭhi is only an initial tool [sammādiṭṭhi-pubbaṅgama], no more no less, which in no way can take the place of paññā which is a final product of a meticulously worked out process of culture. It is also to be noted that sammā diṭṭhi is said to be jointly generated by instruction received from an external source [parato ca ghoso] and correct and meaningful reflection by oneself, with a desire to know [yoniso ca manasikāro]. This exposition, we have from none other than the great stalwart Sariputta [Dve kho āvuso paccayā sammādiṭṭhiyā uppādāya: parato ca ghoso yoniso ca manasikāro. M.1.294] Therefore it goes without saying that sammā diṭṭhi is a pre-requisite which is needed at the very outset and for the very commencement of the spiritual path of the Buddhist.

It would be well for us at this stage to further examine and study this concept

of sammā diṭṭhi in terms of what is said about it elsewhere in Buddhist literature. The best study of it comes again from Thera Sariputta in the Sammaditthi Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [M.1.46 ff.]. While the Buddha was dwelling at Jeta's Grove in Savatthi, Thera Sariputta comes forth, of his own, to explain to the monks this vital concept of samma ditthi in a sutta totally dedicated to its study. As ancillary to this concept of corrected vision, Sariputta introduces three other interesting concepts . They are 1. Ujugatā ' saa diṭṭhi: His vision has been straightened. 2. Dhamme aveccappasādena samannāgato: He is endowed with deep- seated delight or satisfaction [i.e. delight gained through conviction] in the Dhamma . 3. āgato imaṃ saddhammaṃ: He has gained admission into the True Doctrine, i.e. the teaching of the Buddha.

The very first remark venerable Sariputta makes with regard to what he considers to be the basic virtue of sammā diṭṭhi impresses us with its down to earth realism. It gives sammā diṭṭhi a truly Buddhist religious authenticity. Sariputta says it is the ability of the true disciple to discern what is unwholesome as unwholesome and discover the source of its origin. The same applies to the discovery of what is wholesome [Yato ca kho ariyasāvako akusalañ ca pajānāti akusalamūlañ ca pajānāti kusalañ ca pajānāti kusalamūlañ ca pajānāti. Ettāvatā ' pi kho ariyasāvako sammādiṭṭhi hoti ujugatā ' ssa diṭṭhi dhamme aveccappasādena samannāgato āgato imaṃ saddham. loc. cit.]. Thereafter, the unwholesome are identified as the dasa akusala which are listed in Buddhism and the wholesome as their opposites. Their origin is traced back in the true Buddhist style to the three roots of evil, viz. lobha dosa moha.

Once on this track of thinking which commences with sammā diṭṭhi, the Sutta tells us, a true disciple heads in the direction of total liberation. It is a positive lift-off from the world of mundane existence and the consequent movement is towards total eradication of suffering or unsatisfactoriness of life in the world [Yato kho āvuso ariyasāvako akusalañ ca pajānāti akusalamūlañ ca pajānāti...so sabbaso rāgānusayaṃ pahāya paṭighānusayaṃ paṭivinodetvā asmī ' ti

diṭṭhimānānusayaṃ samūhanitvā avijjaṃ pahāya vijjaṃ uppādetvā diṭṭhe ' va dhamme dukkhassantakaro hoti. M.1.47] . One does this by correcting oneself. One acquires moral goodness within oneself, eliminates greed and hostility as sources of evil, sees danger in harbouring egoistic weaknesses, and chooses to move out of the darkness of living [vijjaṃ uppādetvā]. Therein lies the salvation and liberation one seeks.

Thera Sariputta, answering the inquiring monks who ask him about other possible facets or aspects of sammā diṭṭhi, takes us through a wide range of about fifteen vantage points from anyone of which one could shoot in the direction of total liberation. The first has already dealt with the very down-to-earth moral problem of kusala and akusala [i.e. good and bad living modes of humans] or the socio-ethical correction of Buddhist living at the very primary level. Immediately thereafter we are presented with the highly philosophical Buddhist approach to the subject of āhāra [literally meaning food] or bases of sustenance which contribute to the perpetuation of the life process of beings both at the physical as well as psycho-physical levels. This perhaps also envisages the transmigrational segment of Buddhist thinking [Cattāro ' me āvuso āhārā bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ ṭhitiyā sambhavesīnaṃ vā anuggahāya...M.1.48].

The first of these refers to gross food normally consumed by humans and goes under the name of kabalīnkāra-āhāra. Next comes phassa-āhāra, i.e. the perceptive basis of contact [through the sixfold sensory channels: saḷāyatana-paccayā phasso] in the cognitive process. The third is the very cognitive process itself and is termed mano-sañcetanā āhāra. Finally we have viññāṇa-āhāra [consciousness-sustenance] which we choose to regard as the ceaseless carrier of life [saṃvattanika-viññāṇa at M.11.262] until it totally ceases to be on the attainment of Nirvana [Viññāṇassa nirodhena etth ' etaṃ uparujjhati. D.1.223]. This consciousness or viññāṇa is continuously energised by saṅkhāra or the apperceptive process of mind-body activity which is set in motion in the process of living. In Nirvana it is de-energised [Visaṅkhāragataṃ cittaṃ taṇhānaṃ

khayaṃ ajjhagā. Dhṃ.v.154]. It is this viññāṇa which is capable of stretching across [yaṃ taṃ saṃvattanikaṃ viññāṇaṃ assa anañjūpagamaṃ. M.11.262] through the proliferated process of existences called saṃsāra. It is beautifully described as a stream of consciousness, linking up two units of human existence through saṃsāra [..purisassa ca viññāṇa-sotamaṃ. pajānāti ubhayato abbochinnamaṃ idha-loke patitthitaṃ ca paraloke patitthitaṃ ca. D.111.105]. All these sustenances or āhāra are said to be generated by taṇhā or craving, i.e. literally thirsting for [Taṇhā-samudayā āhāra-samudayo]. . The Noble Eightfold Path is immediately then drawn in as the only way for the total elimination of these sources of sustenance, i.e. of being bonded to life on the mundane plane [Ayaṃ eva ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo āhāra-nirodha-gāminī paṭipadā. M.1.48].

Sariputta opts to offer a great deal more in this Sutta under what he considers to be the scope of sammā diṭṭhi. Concluding his analysis of āhāra, he picks up the Four Noble Truths as his next subject of study. A knowledge of these truths, or more precisely a total comprehension of them[...dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-paṭipadaṃ pajānāti], he argues, should lead to release from dukkha [...dukkhassa ' antakaro hoti]. Following this, he brings the entire teaching of Causal Genesis or Paṭicca-samuppāda [Sk. Pratītya-samutpāda] within the range of sammā diṭṭhi. He starts with what is known and ever visibly present in the lives of humans, namely the process of decay and death [jarā-maraṇa] and retracing one's steps backwards, pushes him or her to the primary source of origin of trouble in avijjā. This is disclosed to be ignorance or lack of correct knowledge [a + vijjā] of the Four Noble Truths which in turn is said to be rooted in defilements of the mind or āsava which may, with a fair degree of accuracy, be described as defiling in-flows [in the primary sense of ā + sava] or life-generating fermentations in the secondary sense of āsava [āsava-samudayā avijjā-samudayo āsava-nirodhā avijjā-nirodho. Ibid. 54]. The Noble Eightfold Path is declared to be leading to the total cessation of this ignorance [Ayaṃ eva ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo avijjā-nirodha-gāminī-paṭipadā. loc.cit.].

In the last phase of this comprehensive analysis of sammā diṭṭhi we are brought face to face with a study of the concept of āsava in Buddhism. We are told that there are three categories of āsava, namely kāmāsava [related to sensual pleasures], bhavāsava [related to samsaric existence] and avijjāsava [related to ignorance of the truth]. Here we are told, in a reverse process, that āsava have their origin in avijjā as was avijjā having its origin in āsava [āvijjā-samudayā āsava-samudayo avijjā-nirodhā āsava-nirodhoirodho. Ibid. 55] These āsava must be known and comprehended [pajānāti] with regard to their origin, their cessation and the way leading to their cessation . It is this knowledge which ultimately leads to the total elimination of all traces of lustful attachment [sabbaso rāgānusayaṃ pahāya], which enables the eradication of residual remains of hostility [paṭighānusayaṃ paṭivinodetvā] and the extermination of thoughts of egoistic assertiveness [asmī ' ti diṭṭhi-mānānusayaṃ samūhanitvā]. This ultimate stage is none other than final release from all dukkha which could definitely be attained in this very life [... diṭṭhe' 'va dhamme dukkhass 'antakaro hoti. loc.cit.].

In an accurate and meaningful study of the Eightfold Path, the primary and initial position of sammā diṭṭhi is also found to be vindicated by the correct stimulus and correct direction it provides to the entire thinking process of the human mind. Therefore in working out the development of the Path, the position assigned to sammā saṅkappa or correct-thought-processes as succeeding sammā diṭṭhi or corrected vision is by no means accidental. In a spiritually and morally sound way, these two items, correct-thought-processes unmistakably and necessarily following corrected vision, jointly but successively, appear to be playing the very vital role of regulating human conduct of speech and action and the very modes of human living. .As items 3, 4 and 5 of the Path, these three are brought under the categories of sammā vācā, sammā kammanto and sammā ājīvo. This thoroughness and comprehensiveness in regulating the lives of humans, laying at the same time the entire responsibility for what they personally do at their own door step, gives Buddhism a unique place in its scrutiny of the moral problem in the world.

Mr. Goenka, writing on the Noble Eightfold Path as recently as 1993 [in a compilation which is entitled *Entering the Stream: An Introduction to the Buddha and His Teachings*. Ed. by Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn, Boston: Shambala, 1993], seems to make an unwarranted attempt to smuggle into the Eightfold Path the category called wisdom which rightly belongs only to the Threefold Culture of *tisso sikkhā* [See p.106 ff., specially p.112]. He not only appears to strangely reassign *sammā diṭṭhi* and *sammā saṅkappa* to a position succeeding *sammā samādhī* [as though they were its outcome], but he also quite unjustifiably and arbitrarily reshuffles these two, and places *sammā saṅkappa* ahead of *sammā diṭṭhi* as though the former were the precursor to the latter. This absolutely makes no sense to any student of Buddhism who knows the subject he is talking about..

Let us here draw the attention of at least the more responsible readers to the crystal clear statement in the *Mahacattarisaka Sutta* [M.111. 72 f.] where it severally specifies that *sammā diṭṭhi* always precedes 1. *sammā saṅkappa*, 2 . *sammā vācā*, 3 . *sammā kammanta* and 4. *sammā ājīva*, each one in turn . Here the sutta goes further to add that each of these four items have also some measure of *sammā vāyāma* [right endeavour] and *sammā sati* [right mindfulness] accompanying them [loc. cit.]. It would be difficult to concede that these two in this context have the same stature as when they appear as independent members in the Path. They have no more than a associative character. These two, together with *sammā diṭṭhi*, are said to be accompanying all four items from *sammā saṅkappa* to *sammā ājīva* [Itiss ' ime tayo dhammā sammā saṅkappaṃ ... anuparidhāvanti anuparivattanti seyyathīdaṃ sammā diṭṭhi sammā vāyāmo sammā sati . loc.cit.]

Immediately following this, the sutta categorically asserts again that *sammā diṭṭhi* stands at the head of the entire list, i.e. the whole of the Eightfold Path [Tatra bhikkhave sammā diṭṭhi pubbaṅgamā hoti. loc.cit.]. Thereafter, starting with *sammā saṅkappa*, all other seven items of the Path [besides *sammā diṭṭhi*]

follow one another in succession. In other words, it is not to be missed that the Path is arranged in sequential succession, each preceding state contributing to the genesis of the following one. This is particularly clear from the use of the word pahoti [which means originates from] from sammā diṭṭhi up to sammā vimutti [Sammā diṭṭhissa sammā saṅkappo pahoti...sammā nāṇassa sammā vimutti pahoti. M.111.76]. Going backwards in the process, vimutti i.e. final release, is generated through nāṇa [= wisdom = paññā]. This wisdom, which by no means is sammā diṭṭhi [and we are very specific on this], traces itself back to samādhi, and from there onwards the succession proceeds right backwards as far as sammā diṭṭhi which is the legitimate source of origin [and certainly not the end as Mr. Goenka does] of the entire series of the Noble Eightfold Path or Ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo.

By now it should be adequately clear that sammā diṭṭhi as the originator [pubbaṅgama = harbinger] of the way of the Noble Eightfold Path stands in a class and in a position by itself, clearly outside what is implied by the term paññā in the threefold culture or sikkhā. In the final attainment of Nirvana [nibbāna], the acquisition of wisdom or paññā and the total eradication of defilements or āsava are virtually tied up together. It is almost within the sight of wisdom or paññā that āsavā or defilements get terminated [Paññāya c' assa disvā āsavā parikkhīna honti. M.1.160]. The total extinction of defilements or āsavānaṃ khaya and the consequent release of mind through wisdom form, as it were, an inseparable unit [āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññavimuttiṃ diṭṭh'eva dhamme sayāṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā....M.1.71]

Thus it becomes clear that in the Buddhist scheme of salvation paññā or wisdom turns out to be the most efficient tool . It is admittedly not an end in itself but the one and only reliable means for the achievement of the end. It is indeed the final product of a long and incessant process of development which in turn turns out to be the most efficient tool in the acquisition of Nirvana. We have already quoted above the Mahacattarisaka Sutta [M.111.71-78] which clearly

states that the completion of the Eightfold Path generates sammā ñāṇa [i.e. the required quantum of pañña] as a sequel to sammā samādhi [sammā samādhissa sammā ñāṇaṃ pahoti. loc.cit. 76]. It is this sammā ñāṇa which puts the Buddhist aspirant for salvation into orbit [sammā ñāṇassa sammā vimutti pahoti. Ibid.]. It is indeed delightful to find in the Saddharmapundarika Sutra our Venerable Maha Kasyapa precisely stating that from the Theravada idealist stand which he takes up salvation is essentially personal and self-acquired and that wisdom or ñāṇa is geared solely for its attainment and no more [Pratyātmikīṃ nirvṛti kalpayāmah Etāvatā ñāṇaṃ idam na bhūyah].